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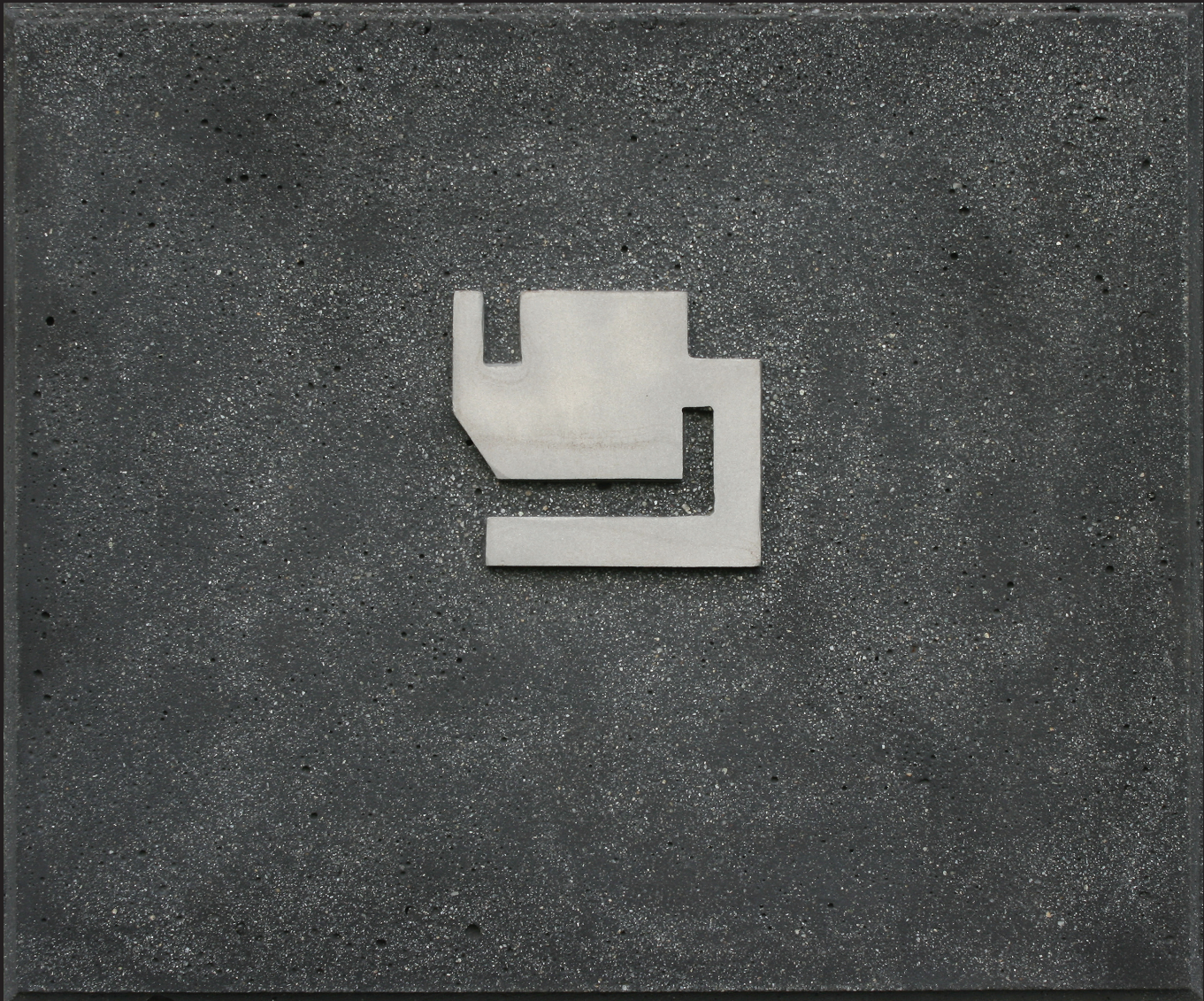
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TOM BILLS  
**SCULPTURE**

University Art Gallery  
Department of Art  
School of the Arts  
California State University Stanislaus

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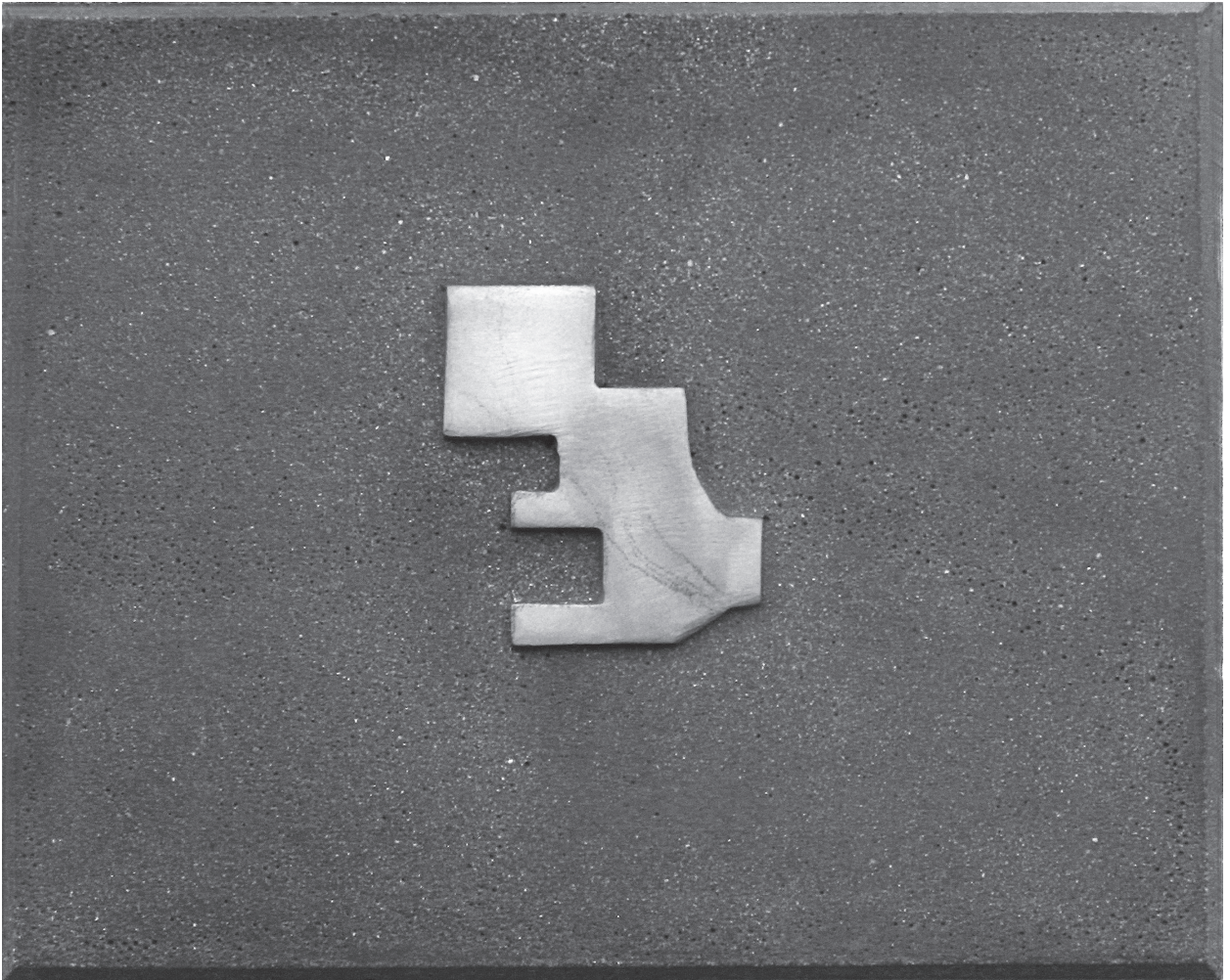
# DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Tom Bills – Sculpture, represents a chance to experience the work of Tom Bills. Tom Bills is heavy weight artist in more than one way. In his years of making and exhibiting work he has worked and show with some of the most important artists in the world. His interesting working habits of being a bi-coastal artist have always kept him on the forefront of what is new and happening. Yet he retains his roots in minimalism and always takes it's roots to new highs. Heavy weight, works that require a forklift to create and move cannot ever be taken lightly and the ideas and finalized works of Tom Bills certainly always add up. After following his work for many years I am very excited to be able to share with you this truly outstanding exhibition.

I would like to thank the many colleagues have been instrumental in presenting this exhibition. Tom Bills for the opportunity of exhibiting his outstanding work, David Roth for the wonderful essay, the College of the Arts, California State University, Stanislaus for the catalog design and Claremont Print and Copy for the printing this catalog.

Great thanks are also extended to the Instructionally Related Activities Program of California State University, Stanislaus, as well as to anonymous donors for the funding of the exhibition and catalog.

Dean De Cocker, Director  
University Art Gallery  
California State University, Stanislaus



2012 "Pointing and running", cement, stainless steel, 12.125 x 9.875 x 1.5 inches



# TOM BILLS' POST-INDUSTRIAL GLYPHS

Outwitting the human instinct to find real-world referents in abstract art is one of the toughest feats an artist can undertake. Minimalism, by dispensing with gesture and tactility and by emphasizing “primary structures,” attempted to do exactly that. By purging art of content, it encouraged viewers to create meaning unfettered by the usual signifiers. But over time things began to mutate. Even seminal works like Dan Flavin’s fluorescent tubes and Donald Judd’s gleaming metal boxes acquired meaning through the art-about-art conversations they provoked. Thus, if there’s a lesson to be learned from this experiment, it’s that meaning is a lot like matter. It can’t be created or destroyed, only coaxed into new configurations by different stimuli.

So it is with the art of Tom Bills. In his efforts to construct a personal iconography independent of art-historical and conventional representational associations, Bills has occupied various niches along the minimalist continuum. After earning a BA degree from Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, Bills moved to New York in 1975 to enter the Whitney Independent Study Program. On the strength of his work there, he was accepted into Yale’s MFA program the following year. Shortly before he started he met Richard Serra through a mutual acquaintance. Serra needed someone to haul 100 pieces of sheet rock up to a sixth floor loft he was renovating in Tribeca, and Bills who was living off the GI Bill, immediately signed on. The relationship lasted until 1998, during which time Bills became Serra’s chief assistant, confidante and drinking buddy. “We were tight, as if we were bonding around the same family struggle” Bills recalls.

Bills, however, was no acolyte; the influence ran both ways. When Serra received the commission for St. John’s Rotary – a monumental curvilinear steel structure measuring 10 feet high by 200 feet long – Bills helped conceive the design and oversee its construction. “I laid the piece out with him, did all the mapping, rented a helicopter and shot aerial photos before and after the piece was installed.” He did the same with Tilted Arc – the infamous public sculpture that New York City commissioned and then destroyed. “I was there from day one, mapping it out on the ground with sand bags, steel poles and string.”

Operating in the tight-knit downtown art community, Bills became close to many of the era’s leading figures, having met them years earlier as an undergrad at Oakland University whose visiting artists program introduced him to Martin Puryear, Judy Rifka, and Elizabeth Murray. Once in New York, he expanded his circle with help from Murray, and from his then partner who’d landed a job at the DIA Foundation. Its habitués “became our family,” Bills recalls. “We traveled to Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field twice and flew with Jim Turrell in his plane to the site of Roden Crater. On other fronts I worked on projects at Spacetime Constructs” [in Queens] which evolved over time to include Socrates Sculpture Park.

In 1976, Bills’ work appeared in a solo show at 112 Greene Street, the city’s sole alternative space (later to become White Columns), and was later included in several historically important group shows, the most significant being Sculpture: The Tradition in Steel at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art (1983-4). Curated by Janice Parente and Phyllis Stigliano, it featured practically every important American sculptor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Calder to Serra. Though Bills would subsequently go on to build large-scale concrete works in many different configurations, it’s significant that the arched, low-slung, forms he exhibited in this show, would appear repeatedly over the next 30 years in various guises, evincing the same spare, reductionist qualities we see in his visual thinking today.

I first encountered Bills in 2005, five years after he'd moved from New York to take a teaching position at UC Davis. At the time he was showing floor- and pedestal-mounted slabs of plasma torch-cut steel whose asymmetrical shapes and roughed-up surfaces obliquely referenced landscape and figures. They stood, on average, about two feet tall and weighed between 800 and 2,000 pounds. Some were rusted; others were polished to a high sheen and gave a shimmering, zingy energy. Most had see-through orifices cut into them, which lent these squat, ungainly blocks a volumetric heft greater than what their actual size might otherwise warrant. Taking their full measure meant meeting them on their own terms -- kneeling or lying down. My expectation, based on what I knew of Bills' relationship with Serra, was that these objects would someday be reformulated at an exponentially larger size, as muscular, ego-flexing monoliths.

Instead, Bills, a modest man more inclined toward quiet introspection than to creating large-scale public art projects, moved in the opposite direction by miniaturizing his signature shapes. What we see in this show are works that exist in two- and three-dimensional space and that function, simultaneously, as drawings and sculptures. They consist of single pieces of stainless steel plate, cut with a plasma torch and hand-filed, a few inches square. These he sets against dark concrete "frames" that measure just over a foot on their longest side. In looking at them, it's not the image that we process, but the entire object. They represent high Minimalism at its most austere-provocative. The silvery forms are complex and irregular, and resemble nothing you can put a name to. While some shapes (Over Around the Top) do bring to mind ancient glyphs, and others (State of Mind) recall pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, "each," says Bills, "refers only to itself, and tries hard not to imply anything. They are, he continues "created outside of nature" to produce "a visual presence that will remain unchanged -- with no message, no suggestion that they concluded and no sign of a beginning looking for an end."

To this Suzuki-like assertion, I can only respond by quoting Mark Rothko whose observation -- "There is no good art about nothing" -- truly applies to Bills, because his forms -- despite the nothingness he ascribes to them -- originate in real-world experience, that being his employment in Detroit as a mechanical draftsman, rendering images of Dodge truck parts without knowing their names or functions. Bills remembers the shapes clearly, and the variants he extrapolates from memory are the building blocks of a visual vocabulary whose personal significance is profound. In 1968, after a year on the job he was drafted and sent to Vietnam a year later as an infantry soldier, an experience that haunts him to this day. However, the part of that experience he allows into his art is different from the part that haunts him. He recalls points on operational maps, and he mentally connects the dots, forming abstract patterns whose tactical applications are long forgotten, but whose shapes echo in the works you see here.

I won't attempt to draw any Rosebud-like conclusions about the psychological import of these remembrances in steel and concrete, except to say that they constitute a remarkable response to pain and loss. Where the surrealists gave us grotesque faces and bodies and the abstract expressionists gave us anguished gestures, Bills, the minimalist, attenuates strong emotions in sculptural drawings. Their interior meanings may be cloaked in mystery, but their near-visionary quality, assured lines and incongruous framing stake serious claim on our imaginations. With no beginnings and no endings -- only static points that refer to no objective facts -- they leave us free to roam.

# # #

David M. Roth is the editor and publisher of Squarecylinder, an online magazine covering visual art in Northern California.

# ARTIST STATEMENT

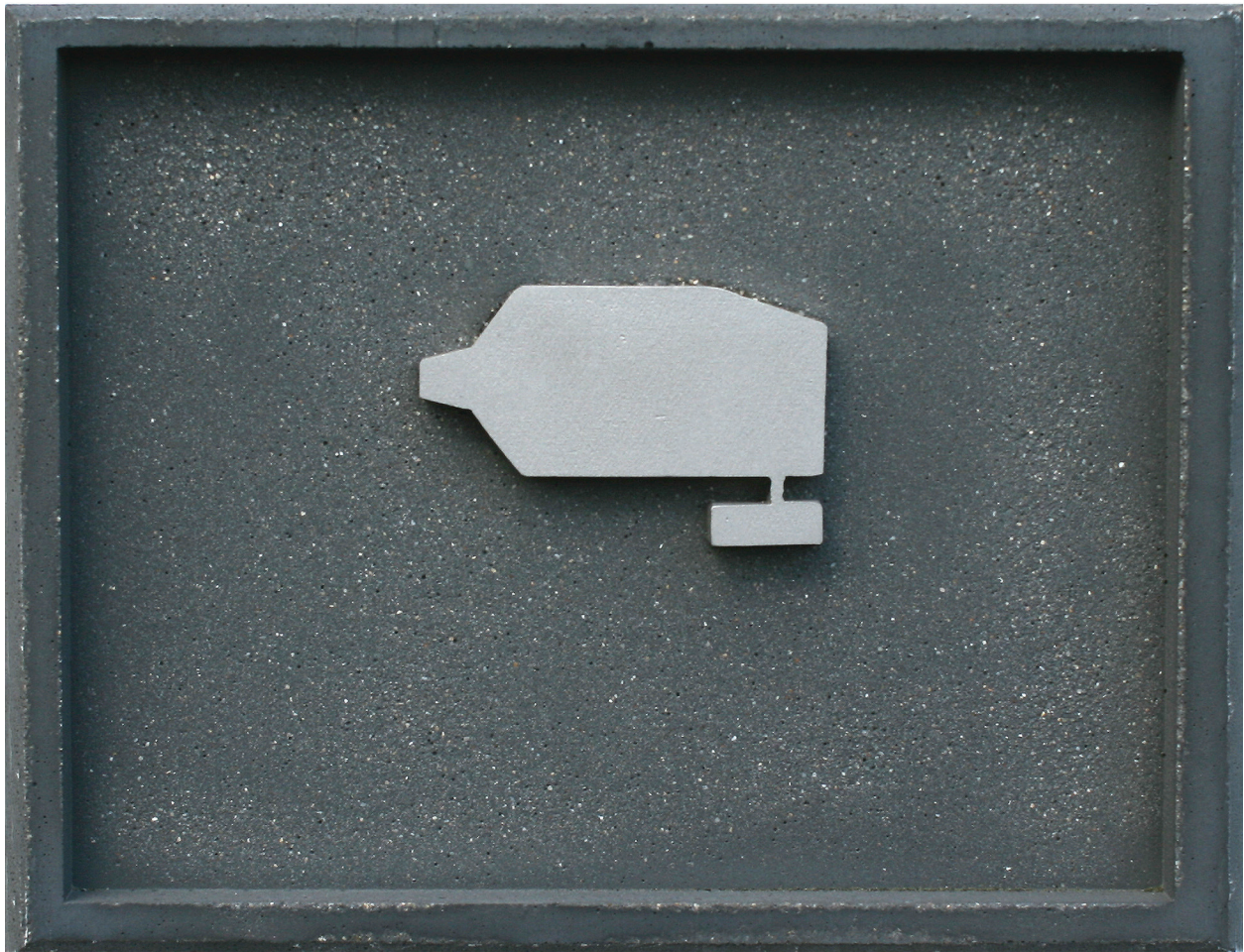
Once committed to an idea, the real work begins. How does one maintain a relationship with what they are doing if it only makes sense to them? What can you pursue within a visual idea...over and over again, day after day asking the same questions, "What is it, why do it, what is there to find?" In the arts, we have the luxury to ask these questions of anything and begin with the assumption that the answer will always be momentary at best, permanently left on the table but left behind immediately to begin again. The search is the art. When it becomes unmistakably clear that the painting or sculpture holds its own identity, good or bad, there is nothing left for the artist to do except move on. Start again.

My approach has always been to try and shift the energy of "Being" from the self to the work. I guess my ideal sculpture would be staring at me, asking what I wanted, why are you looking at me? I want the work to stand unchallenged because its own character is final. When there is nothing to give but itself as fact, and there is no expectation that the viewer has to bring forth an understanding of anything, the piece is successful.

The following plates are images of works from as early as 1976 and every five or so years since then. Many of them are flame-cut steel and cast lead – a process I continue to this day as well as an example of a larger permanent outdoor work of cast concrete. The earliest work is made of plywood, later to include cement, to contain the fragility of the unattached pieces.

The invitation to have an exhibition at CSU Stanislaus has given me the opportunity to include a historical survey of my own work in an attempt to support the most current work and to somehow connect some dots over a period of more than four decades. I am grateful to have had this venue to present the number of works I was able to include and hope that the work together in this catalogue and exhibition will help demonstrate that original idea of instilling my presence in the room disguised as a sculpture, however convoluted that may seem.

IMAGES



*The Foot*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 13.625 x 10.5 x 2 inches



*Fourthcoming*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 12.25 x 10.5 x 2 inches



*ha, the stranger*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 11.75 x 9.375 x 1.375 inches

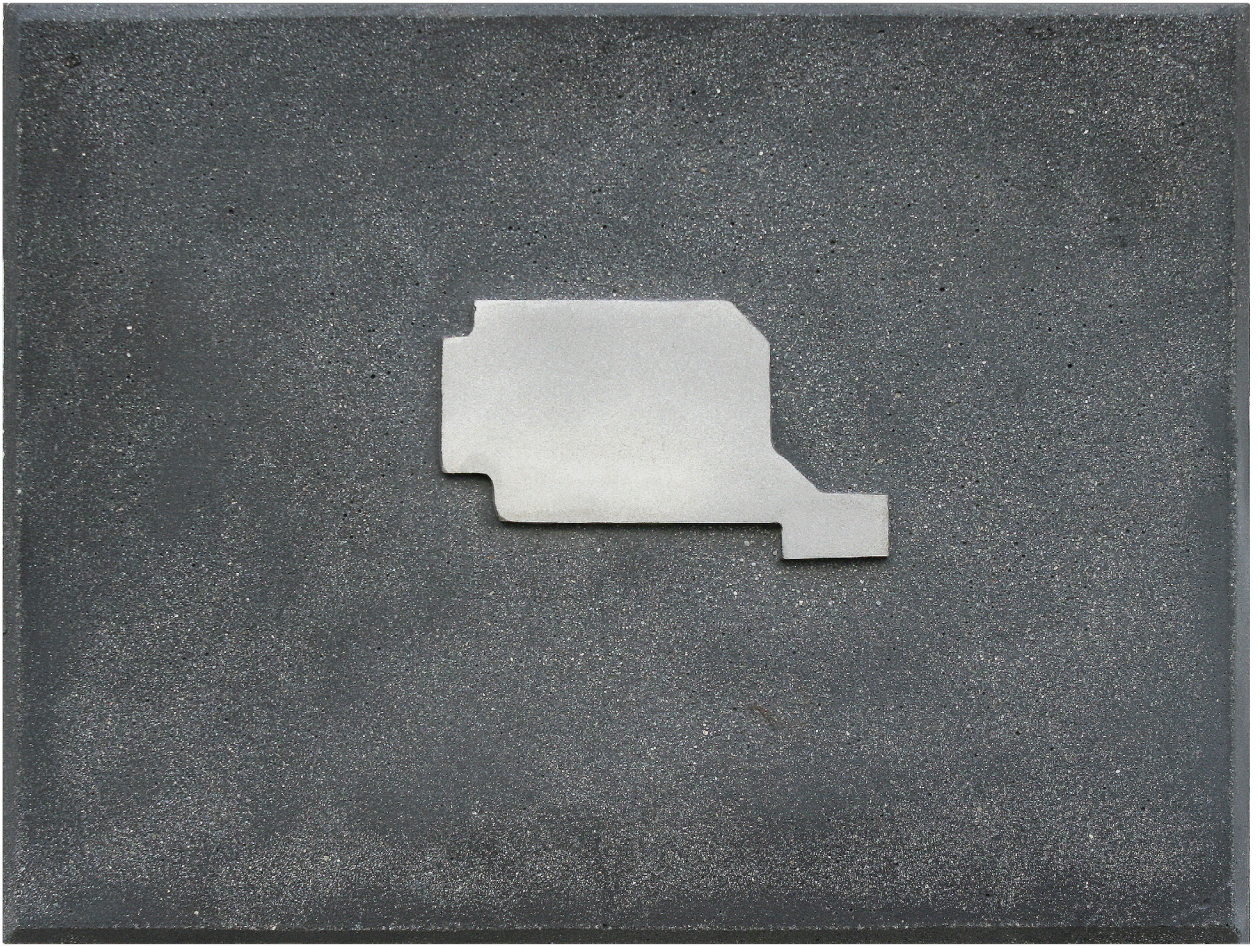


*Color Field*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 12.25 x 10.5 x 1.5 inches





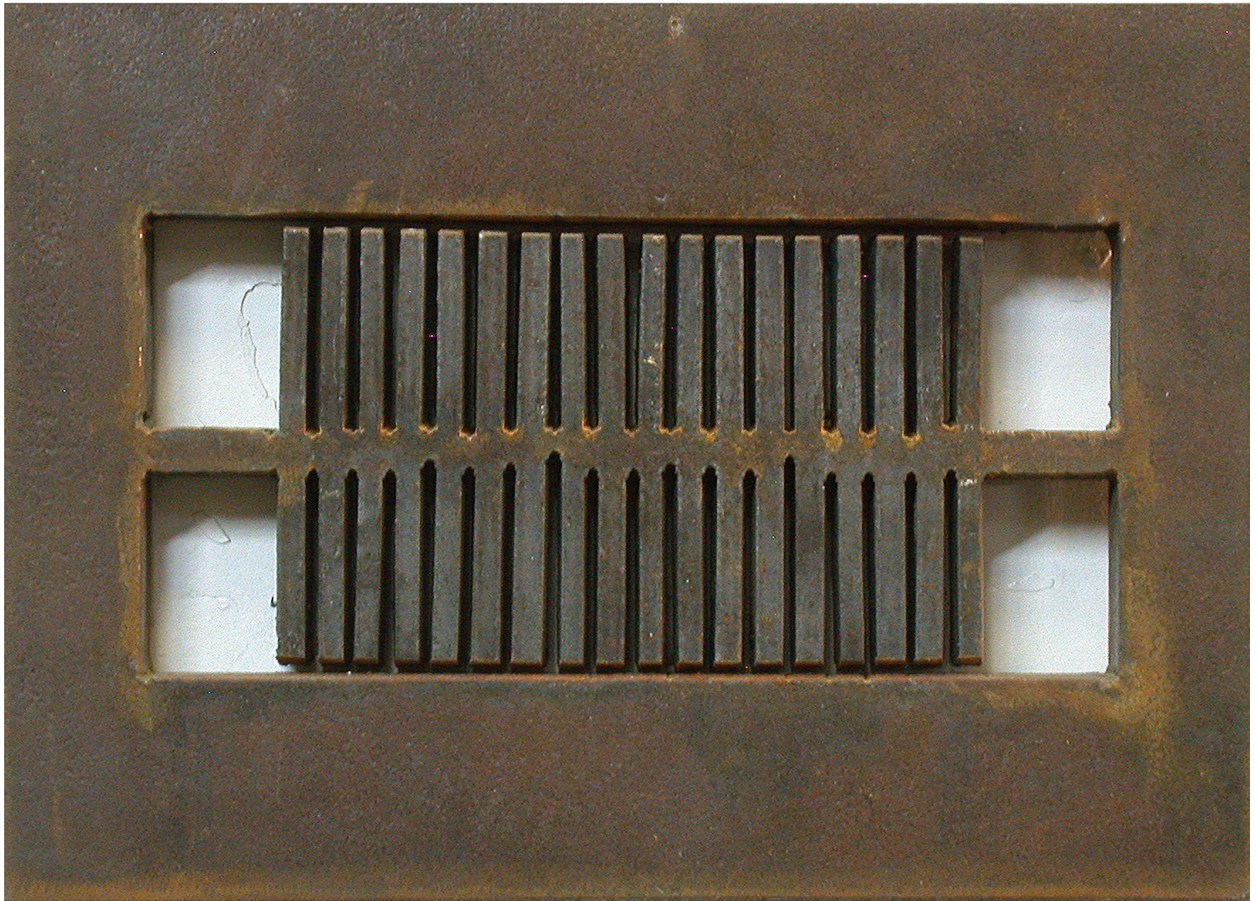
*Three Down Home*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 12.5 x 10.5 x 1.5 inches



*A State of Mind*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 13.375 x 10.125 x 1.5 inches



*Steel Flags*, 2012, flame cut steel plate, 13.75 x 10.75 x 1.25 inches



*Eighteen Belted Figures*, 2012, flame cut steel plate, 15.75 x 11.25 x 1.25 inches



Formwork for Cast Concrete, 1990, Socrates Sculpture Park, 16 x 10 x 4 feet



*Brooklyn Studio Installation, 1987, flame cut steel plate and cast lead*



*Black and Blue*, 1984, cast cement and bent steel plate, 30 x 20 x 12 inches



*Each for the Other*, 1990, Lodz, Poland, cast concrete, 16 x 10 x 4 feet





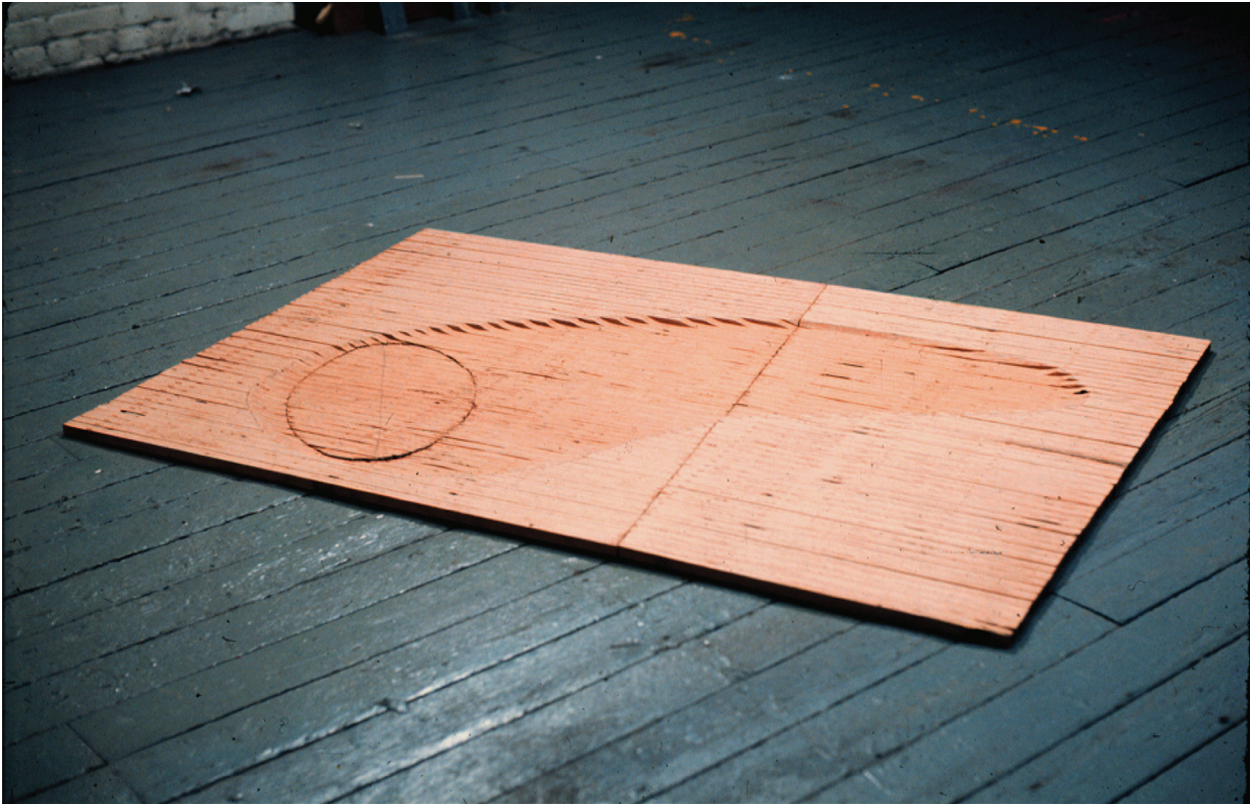
*Standing Figure Without Arms*, 1983, flame cut steel plate, 21 x 16 x 8 inches



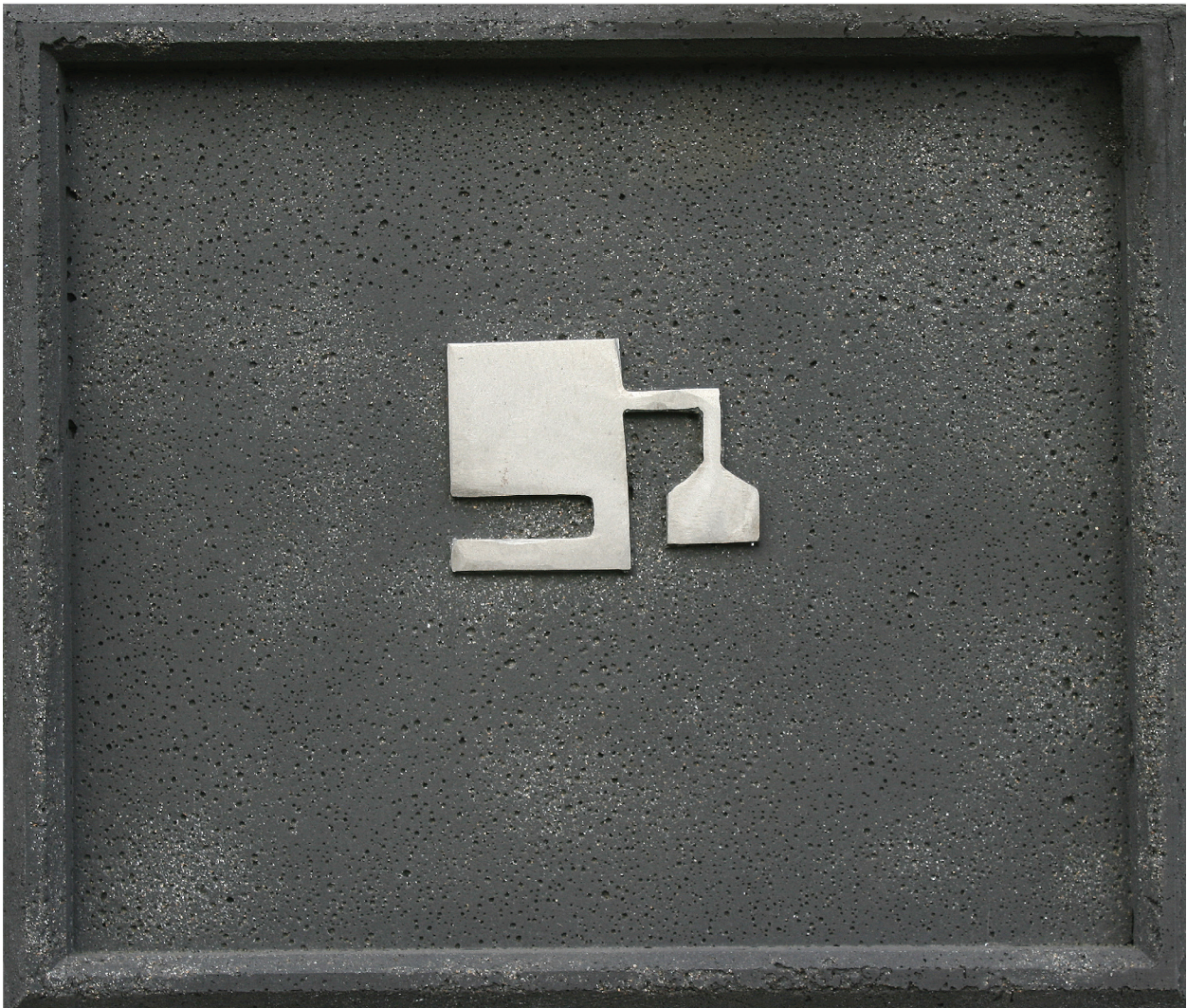
Y Curve Top, 1983, flame cut steel plate, 21 x 16 x 8 inches



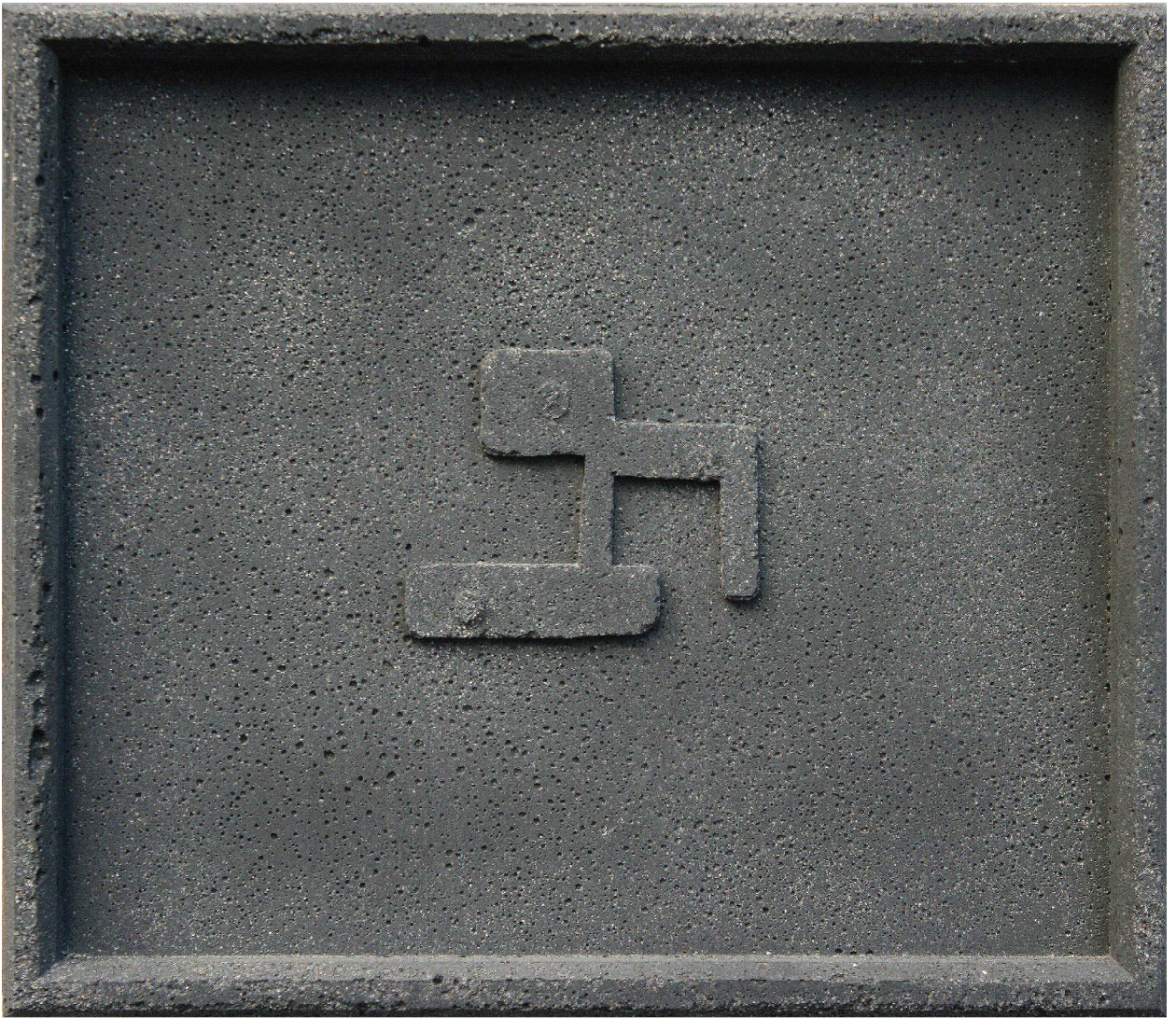
*Compressed Curves*, 1979, plywood and cement, 21 x 12 x 4.5 inches



*Elliptical Flats*, 1976, plywood, 60 x 40 x 0.75 inches



*Apparently Rising*, 2012, cement, stainless steel, 12.25 x 10.25 x 2 inches



*Tracks of My Tears*, 2012, cast cement, 11 x 9.5 x 1.5 inches

# TOM BILLS

1948 Born, Detroit, Michigan

## Education

1970-1972 Macomb Community College, Warren Mi.  
1974 Oakland University, Pontiac, MI. B.A.  
1975 Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, NY.  
1978 Yale University, New Haven, CT. M.F.A.

## Major Grants and Awards

1980 National Endowment for the Arts  
1986 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation  
1989 New York Foundation for the Arts  
1989 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation  
1990 New York Foundation for the Arts  
2000 Guggenheim Fellowship

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

1976 112 Greene Street Gallery, New York, NY.  
1978 Blum-Helman Gallery, New York, NY.  
1979 P.S.1 The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, (Rm. 301) L.I.C., NY.  
1979 N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, IL.  
1980, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1991 Feigenson/Rosenstein Gallery, Detroit, MI.  
1983-1985 Manhattan Art Gallery, New York, NY.  
1986-1987 Anne Plumb Gallery, New York, NY.  
1988 John Good Gallery, New York, NY.  
1988-1991 Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY.  
1990 Rolf Ricke Gallery, Cologne, West Germany  
1990 Ben Shahn Galleries, William Paterson College, NJ.  
1995-1996 E.S. VanDam Gallery, New York, NY.  
2004-2012 b.sakata garo, Sacramento, CA.  
2005-2011 Don Soker, San Francisco, CA.  
2010 Phyllis Stigliano Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

## Selected Reviews

1979 Spector, Buzz. "Tom Bills/Michiko Itani", The New Art Examiner, Illustration.  
1980 Halbreich, Kathy. "The Material Object", Mass Institute of Technology, Illustration.  
1981 Miro, Marsha. "Meadow Brook Giants Are Afoot" The Detroit Free Press,  
1982 Brentano, Robin with Sawit, Mark. "112 Greene Street" New York University Press, Illustration.  
1983 Bomb Magazine. No 6. "Sculpture and Fiction", pp70-71 Illustration.  
1983 Stigliano & Parente "Steel Sculpture": Nassau County Museum, Catalog, Roslyn Harbor, NY. Illustrations.  
1983 Glueck, Grace. "Steel Has Won A Place In Sculpture" The New York Times  
1984 Parente, Janice & Stigliano, Phyllis. Nassau County Museum, outdoor installations. Illustrations  
1984 Baker, Kenneth. "Tom Bills at Manhattan Art" Art In America, Illustration.

- 1984 Westfall, Stephen. "Tom Bills at Manhattan Art" Arts Magazine, Illustration.
- 1984 Preston, Malcolm. "Sculpting With A Meadow As Medium" Newsday, Illustration.
- 1985 Brenson, Michael. "Tom Bills At Manhattan Art", The New York Times.
- 1985 Braff, Phillis. "Sculpture Inspired by the Site", The New York Times, Illustration.
- 1985 Wasko, Ryszard. "Process and Construction", Catalog, Munchen, Germany. Illustrations.
- 1985 Indiana, Gary. "The Age Of Silver", The Village Voice, December 17, Illustration.
- 1986 Raynor, Vivian. "Tom Bills at Anne Plumb Gallery", The New York Times, May 2.
- 1986 Artists Projects. "Tom Bills" New York/Berlin #2, Illustration.
- 1987 Hagenberg and Mifflin "Living In the Material World", Art Finder Magazine, Illustrations
- 1987 Meilgaard, Mannon. "Local Sculptor "Eccentric Newspapers, Birmingham, Mi. Illustrations.
- 1987 Raynor, Vivian. "Sculpture 1987" Johnson Atelier Catalog, March 87, Illustration.
- 1987 Brenson, Michael. "Critics Choice", The New York Times, May 31.
- 1987 Altshuler, Bruce. "Tom Bills" Catalog. Plumb Gallery, New York Illustrations.
- 1987 Usui, Kiichi. "Magic in the Minds Eye", Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Illustrations.
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- 1988 Snowden, Gilda. "Tom Bills", The Detroit Focus, Fall 88, Illustrations.
- 1989 Princenthal, Nancy. "Tom Bills at Zabriskie" Art In America, April, Illustration.
- 1989 Tully, Judd. "Made in New York" Catalog, Williams Center for the Arts, Illustrations.
- 1989 Brenson, Michael. "Bold Sculpture for Wide Open Spaces", The New York Times, Illustration.
- 1989 Socrates Sculpture Park. "Sculpture City", Catalog, Illustrations.
- 1989 Stockebrand, Marianne. "Rolf Ricke" Catalog, Kolnischen Kunstverein, Illustrations.
- 1991 Brenson, Michael. "Tom Bills at Zabriskie Gallery", The New York Times.
- 1991 Cyphers, Peggy. "Tom Bills at Zabriskie", Arts Magazine, May, pp. 102, Illustration.
- 1991 Miro, Marsha. "Made In America", The Detroit Freepress Magazine, Illustrations.
- 1993 Zech, Sabine. "Neue Totalitat", Catalog Kunst der 90er Jahre. Illustrations
- 1993 Raynor, Vivian. "Walking in Fields Where Sculpture Holds Sway", The New York Times.
- 1994 Morgan, Robert C. "Doing Art in Poland", Cover Magazine, Jan 94 pp. 14.
- 1994 Sureck, Suzy. "Construction In Process", New Observations, # 102, Illustration.
- 1996 Wasko, Richard. "The Artists Museum in Poland", Illustrations.
- 1997 The Garden Matrix, "Catalogue Abington Art Center, Abington, MD. Illustrations.
- 1998 A Sustaining Passion "Catalogue", Cedar Rapids Museum, IA. Illustrations
- 1999 William Paterson University Catalogue, "A Dialogue with Art", Illustration.
- 2000 The Bridge "Catalogue", Melbourne, Australia, Illustrations.
- 2001 Morgan, Robert "A Polish Diary", Sculpture Magazine, Illustration.
- 2001 Vine, Richard. "Report from Poland", Art In America, Mar.
- 2002 Peter Frank. "Four new Faculty", catalogue Illustrations
- 2004 Roth, David. "Tom Bills at b.sakata garo" Art Review, Illustration.
- 2002 Strong, Geoff. "Public Art: now you see it ..." "The Age," Melbourne, Australia Illustration.
- 2002 Frank, Peter. "Gone West," John Natsoulas Gallery, Catalog, Illustrations.
- 2003 James J. Kelly. The Structural Idea, Waveland Press Inc., Long Grove, Illinois, Illustration.
- 2004 David Roth. "Tom Bills at b. Sakata Garo", Art Review. Illustration.
- 2004 Zabriski. "Fifty Years" Catalogue Ruder Finn Press Inc. New York, NY. Illustration.
- 2004 James J. Kelly. The Structural Idea Fourth Edition Waveland Press. Illustration.
- 2005 Lilly Wei. "Tom Bills at B. Sakata Garo", Art in America, May. Illustration.
- 2006 "Socrates Sculpture Park" Catalogue, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. Illustrations.
- 2013 David Roth. Catalogue essay, "Tom Bills - Post Industrial Glyphs", CSU Stanislaus, Turlock, CA. Illustrations.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Dean De Cocker, Director



